

Salvation History

The expression translates the German *Heilsgeschichte*, introduced into biblical study by J. C. K. von Hofmann and the Erlangen School, a conservative wing of nineteenth-century Lutheran thought. In his key work, *Weissagung und Erfüllung* (2 vols, 1841-44), von Hofmann sought to base the unity of the scriptures as a whole, and of the OT and NT, each in itself, on their being the proclamation of a divinely-achieved process of redemption in history with Christ at the centre, to be understood and personally appropriated by faith. His approach thus combined three features of biblical faith which have led to his ideas being taken up by three different schools of theology. His emphasis on the actual events of the history of Israel* and the life of Christ, forming a purposeful sequence leading from Old Testament to New, appears in the work of scholars such as G. E. Wright (*God Who Acts*, 1952), O. Cullmann (*Salvation in History*, ET 1967) and G. E. Ladd (*A Theology of the New Testament*, 1974). They stress the factuality of God's acts in history by which human redemption was achieved, particularly major 'acts of God' such as the exodus and the resurrection.

Cullmann's work, in particular, was written in polemical dialogue with that of R. Bultmann, who took up a second aspect of von Hofmann's approach in his contributions to *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation/Hermeneutics* (ed. C. Westermann, ET 1963) and *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (ed. B. W. Anderson, 1964). For Bultmann the important element in von Hofmann's approach was his stress on the individual's personal appropriation of the salvation events. Salvation history is our ever-repeated personal journey from the pre-Christian time of promise or law to the Christian experience of fulfilment or gospel.

A third appropriation of the model appears in G. von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* (ET 1962-64). Von Rad's stress on salvation history relates more to von Hofmann's understanding of the Bible as the history of the *proclamation* of salvation. Von Rad was aware as von Hofmann was not of the difficulty of establishing what events lie behind the biblical story: his theology was a study of what Israel said about Yahweh's deeds rather than a study of the significance of the deeds themselves. More recent interest in the OT story as narrative could also be seen to link with the feature of von Hofmann taken up by von Rad.

The taking up of the model by such different theological schools has generated confusion. Scholars who wanted to stress the factuality of the redemption events have suspected others who talked in terms of salvation history lest they were using the expression in the second or third sense. Scholars who emphasized the necessity of personal faith were sometimes hostile towards any stress on factual events, seeing this as rationalist and doubting whether history could really bring salvation. Scholars who gave themselves to the study of or tradition history and doubted whether one can identify historical events behind it were in turn wary of the stress on factual acts of God, on the grounds of its being unreflectively supernaturalist and/or uncritical in its approach to the Bible. From other perspectives, the stress on salvation history was faulted for oversimplifying the nature of scripture (which has other themes than this one), for falsifying the nature

of Israel's distinctiveness in relation to other peoples (who also portrayed their gods as acting in history), for understating the significance of word in relation to event in biblical faith, and for working with a Pickwickian understanding of 'acts of God' and/or an idiosyncratic definition of 'history' and/or a different conception of history from the Bible's own. This has led to widespread belief that it is 'time to say goodbye to *Heilsgeschichte*' (J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament*, 1974, p. 325, following F. Hesse, *Abschied von der Heilsgeschichte*, 1971). This may be an over-reaction, given that the model does hold together three important features of biblical faith which need to be prevented from flying apart.

J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, 1981; A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 1978; Henning Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology*, 1985.